

Dillon Savage

The Man in the Mirror: Jacques Lacan's American Reception

Abstract: This article examines the American reception of the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (1901–1981), a vociferous critic of the “American way of life” whose late-in-life appearances across the Atlantic were met with both admiration and confusion. Starting in the late 1960s, U.S.-based academics and analysts began to appropriate and criticize Lacan’s work in order to advance intellectual projects imbued in various ways with the era’s political and cultural radicalism. Lacan’s ambiguous teachings on subjects like patriarchal authority, feminine sexuality, and the relationship between the individual and society inspired, I argue, a fundamentally ambivalent form of engagement in American intellectuals interested in Marxism, feminism, or the reform of psychoanalytic institutions and practices seen as outmoded or conservative.

Keywords: feminism, French theory, Jacques Lacan, Marxism, psychoanalysis

Though he only traveled to the United States after achieving a belated fame in his native France, Jacques Lacan seems to have inspired more confusion than admiration during his 1966 and 1975 sojourns across the Atlantic. The earlier visit was occasioned by the famous Johns Hopkins University conference that introduced French structuralism to U.S. academics, “The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man.” Speaking in a barely comprehensible mixture of French and English, Lacan delivered a cryptic lecture (“Of Structure as an Inmixing of an Otherness Prerequisite to Any Subject Whatever”) that another conference participant – Georges Poulet, a professor of French literature at Hopkins who presented a paper on “Criticism and the Experience of Interiority” – described as a “huge bad joke.”¹ The philosopher W. V. Quine met Lacan in 1975, when the latter visited and spoke at a number of American universities.² During lunch at the Harvard Club following Lacan’s talk at MIT, Quine recalled, the

1 Jacques Lacan, “Of Structure as an Inmixing of an Otherness Prerequisite to Any Subject Whatever,” in *The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man: The Structuralist Controversy*, ed. Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Press, 1970), 186–196; Benoît Peeters, *Derrida: A Biography*, trans. Andrew Brown (New York: Wiley, 2013), 555n37.

2 Jacques Lacan, “Conférences et entretiens dans des universités nord-américaines,” *Scilicet*, no. 6/7 (1976): 5–63.

French psychoanalyst asked “bewildering, disconnected questions”; the talk itself touched on a variety of unusual topics including “the really amazing magnitude of elephant droppings.”³ In New York, Lacan demanded a private tour of the Metropolitan Opera, which his guide Pamela Tytell – then a graduate student in French literature at Columbia University – attempted to secure by presenting Lacan to the Met’s director as Jean-Paul Sartre.⁴

If this brief account casts Lacan’s American travels as a catalogue of follies, we can equally look to these events for evidence of a nascent American Lacan cult. During the discussion that followed Lacan’s Hopkins lecture, a graduate student named Anthony Wilden urged bemused auditors to take Lacan’s works seriously and, in order to better appreciate them, to “read Freud.”⁵ Wilden’s doctoral dissertation was a critical edition of the Rome Discourse, a 1953 lecture in which Lacan condemned institutional psychoanalysis as intellectually sclerotic and set forth the basic principles of his own ostensibly revivifying “return to Freud.”⁶ Wilden’s suggestion that his colleagues read Lacan in order to read Freud through a Lacanian lens betrayed the perhaps inevitable sympathy with the French analyst that resulted from this work. Along similar lines, Lacan’s New York handler Tytell, at work on a dissertation titled “The French Psychoanalytic Culture,”⁷ would describe her experience encountering Lacan’s texts and undergoing a Lacanian analysis as a liberating acculturation. Lacan’s teaching, she wrote in a short piece for the French monthly *Magazine Littéraire*, provided a way to move beyond the “behaviorist or positivist” American perspective on the mind and toward a more sophisticated grasp of language’s complex, foundational role in a variety of human endeavors, from individual thought to social “communication and exchange.”⁸

Though written for a French audience, Tytell’s remarks hint at an aspect of Lacan’s thought that would be crucial to his American reception: a professed

3 W. V. Quine, *The Time of My Life: An Autobiography* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), 416–417.

4 Elisabeth Roudinesco, *Jacques Lacan*, trans. Barbara Bray (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 374–376.

5 Wilden’s emphasis. “Discussion,” in Lacan, “Of Structure as an Inmixing,” 196.

6 Jacques Lacan and Anthony Wilden, *The Language of the Self: The Function of Language in Psychoanalysis* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Press, 1968).

7 Pamela Tytell, “The French Psychoanalytic Culture: French Psychoanalysts and Their Relationship to the Literary Text” (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1979).

8 Pamela Tytell, “Lacan et l’anglais tel qu’on le parle,” *Le Magazine Littéraire* (February 1977): 16.

contempt for the “American way of life”⁹ closely connected to his struggles with the International Psychoanalytical Association (IPA). Founded by Freud in 1910, the IPA was led throughout much of the 1950s by Heinz Hartmann, an Austrian émigré who became an influential member of the New York Psychoanalytic Society and was one of the leading theorists of ego psychology, a dominant branch of postwar orthodox Freudianism.¹⁰ Ego psychology and the IPA's remit to standardize psychoanalytic training and methods were anathema to Lacan, an inveterate experimentalist skeptical of the notion that analysts should strive to develop strong, autonomous egos and learn to adapt to what Freud had called the reality principle (in his famous paper on the “mirror stage,” Lacan described the formation of the ego as an alienating process of misrecognition, whereby a fantasy of corporeal wholeness came to stand in for the infant's basically disorganized, fragmented conception of its bodily experience¹¹). One of the technical innovations he advocated in the Rome Discourse – the analyst should, he argued, be free to “punctuate” sessions by ending them well short of the customary 50-minute mark¹² – sparked a controversy that led to his eventual expulsion from the IPA.

Trained as a psychiatrist in the 1920s and 1930s, a period in which he was close to the Parisian artistic and literary avant-gardes, in the 1950s Lacan began to hold a public seminar that would draw ever larger crowds; he founded

9 In the thematic index to Lacan's *Écrits* compiled by Jacques-Alain Miller, “*The ideology of freedom: theory of the autonomous ego, humanism, human rights, responsibility, anthropomorphism, ideals, instinctual maturation, etc.*” is paired with “*The ideology of free enterprise: the American way of life, human relations, human engineering, brain trust, success, happiness, happy ending, basic personality, pattern, etc.*” under the heading “theory of ideology.” Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2006 [1966]), 857. Emphasis in the original.

10 On Hartmann and ego psychology, see George Makari, *Revolution in Mind: The Creation of Psychoanalysis* (New York: Harper, 2008), 454, 483. In the text of his first public seminar Lacan can be seen scrutinizing the attempts of Hartmann and his colleagues (“[t]he triumvirate who work in New York”: Hartmann, Ernst Kris, and Lacan's own analyst Rudolph Lowenstein) to formulate a theory of the Freudian ego, which Lacan would adopt as his topic for the seminar's second year. Jacques Lacan, *Seminar I: Freud's Papers on Technique, 1953–1954*, trans. John Forrester (New York: W.W. Norton, 1988), 24–25; Jacques Lacan, *Seminar II: The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis, 1954–1955*, trans. Sylvana Tomaselli (New York: W.W. Norton, 1988).

11 Jacques Lacan, “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience,” in Lacan, *Écrits*, 75–81.

12 Jacques Lacan, “The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis,” in Lacan, *Écrits*, 209.

his own school, the École freudienne de Paris (EFP), in 1964.¹³ His rise to intellectual prominence coincided with the brief vogue of structuralism. Drawing inspiration from the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, the structuralists—most notably the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss—approached society, history, and humanity in general as expressions of the resonances and oppositions encoded in closed symbolic systems.¹⁴ For Lacan this meant claiming that the Freudian unconscious was “structured like a language” and treating the Oedipus complex as a linguistic drama marked by the child’s confrontation with “the name of the father” and symbolic castration.¹⁵ It also meant treating the patient’s speech as a chain of signifiers, each of which pointed not to a referent but to another signifier. Meaning emerged in the cracks and fissures of what was actually said, and was indicative not so much of straightforward motivation or intentionality as an elusive, perpetually dissatisfied desire.¹⁶

The case of Lacan, whose rise to fame also intersected with the politically and culturally tumultuous 1960s, further complicates an already thorny historiographical issue: the relationship between psychoanalysis and politics. In different ways, two influential works first published in 1979—Christopher Lasch’s *The Culture of Narcissism* and Carl Schorske’s *Fin-de-siècle Vienna*—drew connections between the psychologization of American culture and the diminution of radical political energies. For Lasch, conspicuous consumption and New Age spirituality had come to occupy the cultural ground formerly held by leftist radicals.¹⁷ In making this argument he drew heavily on psychoanalytic theory, which as he wrote was being revised by analysts such as Heinz Kohut and Otto Kern-

13 For Lacan’s biography see Roudinesco, *Jacques Lacan*. On his role in the history of the French psychoanalytic movement see Elisabeth Roudinesco, *Jacques Lacan & Co: A History of Psychoanalysis in France, 1925–1985*, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

14 On the transnational, but particularly American, history of structuralism (and more generally, “antihumanism”), see Mark Greif, *The Age of the Crisis of Man: Thought and Fiction in America, 1933–1973* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), chapter 10.

15 For a historical account of the theme of castration in the work of Lacan and Georges Bataille, see Carolyn J. Dean, *The Self and Its Pleasures: Bataille, Lacan, and the History of the Decentered Subject* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992).

16 Useful introductions to Lacan’s thought include Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, *Lacan: The Absolute Master* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991); Malcolm Bowie, *Lacan* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991); Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995); David Macey, *Lacan in Contexts* (London & New York: Verso, 1988); John P. Muller and William Richardson, *Lacan and Language: A Reader’s Guide to the Écrits* (New York: International Universities Press, 1982).

17 Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: Norton, 1979).

berg to account for what seemed to be a newly dominant clinical profile: the narcissistic personality.¹⁸ For his part, Schorske argued that the introspective turn that enabled Freud's psychoanalytic breakthrough was also a turn away from politics in the face of an increasingly nationalist and antisemitic political culture. Introducing his book, Schorske wrote that his interest in Freud and his milieu stemmed in part from an observation of American intellectuals' political pessimism in the wake of World War II, accompanied in his view by a "turn from Marx to Freud."¹⁹ Both authors connected psychological thinking to diminished political horizons, even as (in Lasch's case) psychoanalytic categories helped clarify this depoliticizing turn.

More recent scholarship has tended to understand psychoanalysis not as "counterpolitical" (Schorske's term) but rather, politically polyvalent. Dagmar Herzog has, for example, demonstrated affinities between sixties counterculture and European and American analysts and intellectuals who, like Lacan, challenged aspects of the field's midcentury orthodoxy.²⁰ Lacan's own relationship to the era's political radicalism was ambiguous; among Herzog's protagonists are Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, whose *Anti-Oedipus* (1972) was both informed by and critical of his theories. In his history of "French theory" in America, François Cusset similarly highlights this intellectual phenomenon's "countercultural temptations" while also describing it as a "(purely discursive) subversion of the university institution."²¹ The histories of psychoanalysis and "French theory" converge in Lacan's American reception, which reflects these histories' tensions and contradictions. At once linked to and at odds with the political and cultural forces that profoundly reshaped American life in and after the 1960s,²² Lacan's thought was both well suited to the shifting landscape of American intellectual culture at this moment and destined, perhaps, to remain marginal.

18 On the relationship between the psychoanalytic concept of narcissism and the work of Lasch and other postwar American social critics, see Elizabeth Lunbeck, *The Americanization of Narcissism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).

19 Carl Schorske, *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture* (New York: Vintage, 1980), xxiv.

20 Dagmar Herzog, *Cold War Freud: Psychoanalysis in an Age of Catastrophes* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

21 François Cusset, *French Theory: How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, & Co. Transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States*, trans. Jeff Fort (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 54.

22 Intellectual histories of post-sixties America include James Livingston, *The World Turned Inside Out: American Thought and Culture at the End of the 20th Century* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2010); Daniel Rodgers, *Age of Fracture* (Cambridge, MA; London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2012).

In this article I offer a provisional historical sketch of Lacan's American²³ reception by examining the writings and intellectual contexts of several of the U.S.-based academics and analysts who began to study and respond to his work in the late 1960s. The countercultural élan that accompanied the importation of "French theory" into the U.S. favored, I argue, both the appropriation and critique of Lacan's theories by figures like Wilden (one of the first translators of Lacan into English)²⁴; the feminist literary critics Naomi Schor and Jane Gallop; and the literary critic and analyst Stuart Schneiderman. These authors were particularly close to the Lacanian project, both through their familiarity with Lacan's notoriously byzantine corpus and, in the cases of Schor and Schneiderman, through working at the EFP. Considering them together helps us understand the internal dynamics of Lacan's American reception and its relationship to broader phenomena like New Left radicalism, feminism, and the politics of psychoanalytic institutions. If Lacan and his followers would tend to regard America with a mixture of fascination and disdain,²⁵ the American intellectuals discussed here approached Lacan's ideas with a kind of ambivalent enthusiasm. Like Lacan's mirror-gazing infant, both of these groups formed skewed, distorted views of the other that were nevertheless crucial to their own efforts at self-definition.

23 My use of "American" here perhaps calls for qualification. On the one hand, not all of the figures I discuss are American: Wilden was British (though he did his graduate work at Johns Hopkins and spent his career teaching in the U.S. and Canada), as were many of Lacan's anglophone feminist interlocutors, whose work I discuss in the article's second section. On the other hand, I have entirely neglected Lacan's significant Latin American reception, which is beyond the article's scope. For an account of the best-known case, Argentina, see Mariano Ben Plotkin, *Freud in the Pampas: The Emergence and Development of a Psychoanalytic Culture in Argentina* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001).

24 The first of Lacan's papers to be translated into English was "The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious," which appeared in a 1966 special issue of *Yale French Studies* devoted to structuralism. On the history of English translations of Lacan, see Dany Nobus, "The Irredeemable Debt: On the English Translation of Lacan's First Two Public Seminars," *Psychoanalysis and History* 19, no. 2 (2017): 173–214.

25 A recent critical account of Lacanian attitudes toward America (particularly American analysis) is Darian Leader, "Lacan and the Americans," *European Journal of Psychoanalysis*, accessed April 5, 2022, <http://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/lacan-and-the-americans/>.

The Self's Language and the System's Name

A closer look at the work of Anthony Wilden provides an initial glimpse of this ambivalence. Starting with the commentary that accompanied his translation of the Rome Discourse, Wilden brought a great deal of critical scrutiny to Lacan's work in his attempts to explicate and contextualize it. He dismissed claims that he was Lacan's disciple – or along similar lines, that Lacan's ideas could necessarily be incorporated into an emancipatory political agenda. In this way Wilden resembled other politicized readers of Lacan who admired his defiant stance toward institutional authority and suspicion of received wisdom but questioned those of his premises and methods that seemed to smack of patriarchal chauvinism or obscurantist snobbery.

Crucial to this stance was what Wilden saw as the ambiguity of the concept of structure in French structuralism, the peak of whose intellectual fashion coincided with the beginning of Lacan's American reception. Jacques Derrida brought out this ambiguity in his contribution to the 1966 Hopkins conference, a critique of Lévi-Strauss's structural anthropology.²⁶ In Wilden's summary, Derrida found that Lévi-Straussian *bricolage* – the gathering and arrangement of disparate ideas and methods, which the anthropologist likened to non-Western "savage" thinking – resulted in "a sort of decentered and self-criticizing discourse on myths which is itself a myth." If structuralism challenged dominant epistemic convictions – for example, in the neutrality or purity of scientific observation and judgment or the ability of any particular discipline or method to monopolize truth – it did not do so in order to propose alternatives to the epistemic "centers" it displaced, but merely to posit its own set of *ad hoc* methodological models.²⁷

Wilden made a similar point about Lacan. As an intellectual *bricoleur* – employing, in his Hopkins lecture, "the model of the Möbius strip to speak of the subject's relationship to himself" and "using [Gottlob Frege's] theory of integers to discuss the theoretical ramifications of how the child discovers the Other" – Lacan indeed exemplified a certain freedom to play with a diverse set of concepts, using them to construct his own improvised theoretical edifice. But to claim that the unconscious was "structured like a language" (and thus constrained by the imperatives of an ineffable Other) and trace the vicissitudes of

²⁶ Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," in Macksey and Donato, *The Languages of Criticism*, 247–265.

²⁷ Anthony Wilden, "Lacan and the Discourse of the Other," in Wilden and Lacan, *The Language of the Self*, 259.

desire resulting from its interrogation was merely to wield theoretical instruments in apparent indifference to the truths they might reveal.²⁸ Perhaps for this reason, it was far from clear whether the structuralists shared the American New Left's famous goal, Wilden's sympathy with which would become clearer in his subsequent work: identifying, criticizing, and defeating an insidious "system" that combined economic exploitation, racism, and imperialism.²⁹

Wilden's impatience with the failure of Lacan, Lévi-Strauss, and other 1960s intellectual luminaries to live up to that era's political ambitions was more immediately evident in his book *System and Structure* (1972). Here Wilden retained the wide conceptual scope of his study of Lacan, apparently driven by the ambition he announced in the earlier work's conclusion: to put Lacan into conversation with analytic philosophy and "communicationally oriented" psychiatry.³⁰ In Wilden's view, the problem of communication reached far beyond that of psychoanalytic intersubjectivity since communication was always grounded in a social context and societies were complex, dynamic, open systems. Lacan's insight that human experience crossed several distinct existential registers – what he called the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real – was useful in this regard because it hinted at the importance of context and the potential for slippage between the three registers. The same could not be said of the Lacanian effort to elaborate a "logic of the signifier," which for Wilden betrayed a rationalist bias. Like Freud and Lévi-Strauss, Wilden claimed, Lacan tended to flatten multidimensional "analog" differences "of magnitude, frequency, organization, pattern, and the like" into more straightforward "digital" "distinctions and oppositions," thereby relying on faulty, uninterrogated assumptions in his theories of psychic life.³¹ "In other words," Wilden wrote, "only in an individualistic and phallogocentric culture of primarily digital communication and accumulation

28 Wilden, "Lacan," 260.

29 For Students for a Democratic Society president Paul Potter's famous injunction to "name the system," see Paul Potter, "Speech to the April 17, 1965 March on Washington," in *The Sixties Papers: Documents of a Rebellious Decade*, ed. Judith Clavir Albert and Stewart Edward Albert (New York: Praeger, 1984), 223. Drawing on the work of the historian Jeremy Varon, Greif invokes Potter's speech as evidence that in the sixties, "[t]heorizations of structure acquired new urgency," in Greif, *The Age of the Crisis*, 281.

30 Lacan and Wilden, *The Language of the Self*, 309. The school of psychiatry Wilden had in mind is well represented in Paul Watzlawick, Janet Beavin Bavelas, and Don D. Jackson, *Pragmatics of Human Communication: A Study of Interactional Patterns, Pathologies, and Paradoxes* (New York: Norton, 1967).

31 Anthony Wilden, *System and Structure: Essays in Communication and Exchange*, 2nd ed. (London & New York: Tavistock Publications, 1980), 169.

does the Lacanian analysis fully apply. In this context, his analysis is indispensable – provided one knows how to go beyond it.”³²

Adopting a polemical tone in his introduction to the second edition of *System and Structure*, Wilden clarified that to transcend the psychoanalytic account of discontented subjectivity in modern civilization meant incorporating an analysis of the intimate bond between capitalism and scientific discourse into a counter-discursive “guerrilla rhetoric.”³³ More precisely, he claimed that by embracing what he saw as the myth of pure, objective knowledge, university-based natural and social scientists misrecognized or deliberately obscured their own work’s reliance on a set of socioeconomic relations that, if allowed to persist indefinitely, threatened humanity’s survival. Thus their work constituted a kind of symbolic violence, to which Wilden counterposed his own intervention. Of all the philosophers, anthropologists, psychologists, linguists, semioticians, and cyberneticians he discussed in the book, the only one who had developed a “critical and transdisciplinary” and therefore “truly scientific” theoretical model was, Wilden claimed, Karl Marx.³⁴

In his avowed Marxism and enthusiasm for the Lacanian categories of imaginary and symbolic experience, Wilden demands comparison with the literary critic Fredric Jameson. In his 1977 essay on Lacan Jameson was, like Wilden, keen to examine the inherent ambiguity and difficulty of theorizing the relationship between individual subjectivity and broader social or historical processes. Although Marxism tended, Jameson argued, to understand subjectivity as inherently social, while from the perspective of psychoanalysis it was “often merely implicitly so,” both frameworks grappled with the problem of the “insertion of the subject” into the social fabric.³⁵ Jameson saw Lacan’s distinction between imaginary and symbolic – and the critical strategy of elaborating a potential transit from the first to the second – as a powerful analytical tool with significant political implications.³⁶ A properly Lacanian critical approach – one faithful to the logic and spirit, if not necessarily the letter, of Lacan’s texts – would, Jameson suggested, illustrate the relationship between the imaginary and symbolic di-

³² Wilden, *System and Structure*, 22.

³³ Wilden, *System and Structure*, lviii.

³⁴ Wilden, *System and Structure*, xvii.

³⁵ Fredric Jameson, “Imaginary and Symbolic in Lacan: Marxism, Psychoanalytic Criticism, and the Problem of the Subject,” *Yale French Studies*, no. 55/56 (1977): 338.

³⁶ Somewhat contrastingly, Wilden described Lacan’s implicit “injunction to transcend the individualistic identities and oppositions of the Imaginary by an entry into the collective differences of the Symbolic” as “paradoxical” and fatally impeded by capitalism’s tendency to reduce “Symbolic values” to “Imaginary profits.” Wilden, *System and Structure*, 30.

mensions of literary or historical narratives “while preserving [the] radical discontinuity” between them.³⁷ By rhetorically sublating capitalism’s contradictions, this criticism could gesture toward the Marxist desire to realize a post-capitalist utopia. Jameson would build on this idea in his subsequent work, developing a robust method of critical interpretation based on the excavation and redescription of unconsciously “textualized” political and historical material.³⁸

As this brief look at the work of Wilden and Jameson shows, Lacan’s early U.S. reception occurred in the context of an intellectual left marked by the culture and values of 1960s radicalism.³⁹ For these authors, Lacan’s work could usefully be put into conversation with the largely Marxist interpretive framework that informed their understandings of modern culture and politics. As we will now see, Lacan’s feminist readers would find him similarly useful.

Lacan and Feminist Criticism: Thinking with “the Prick”

Like a dream image or a neurotic symptom, the literary critic Naomi Schor’s decision to request funding to study at Lacan’s École freudienne during the academic year 1976–77 was overdetermined. A junior professor of French at Columbia, Schor hoped, she wrote in her application to the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS), to raise her professional stock by undergoing systematic training in psychoanalytic methodology. To do so at Columbia’s own psychoanalytic institute would be problematic due to the institute’s “rigidly structured” training program and the contingency of Schor’s status at Columbia⁴⁰ (upon receiving the grant, she wrote to the chair of the French department, Michael Riffaterre and, citing “exceptionally hard times in the profession,” requested a one-year extension of her appointment⁴¹). Besides, her scholarly interest in “the spe-

³⁷ Jameson, “Imaginary and Symbolic in Lacan,” 378.

³⁸ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981).

³⁹ For a consideration of leftist appropriations of Lacan from the perspective of political theory, see Yannis Stavrakakis, *The Lacanian Left: Psychoanalysis, Theory, Politics* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007).

⁴⁰ Application for ACLS Fellowship, November 12, 1975, Naomi Schor papers, Brown University Library, Providence, RI, Ms.2006.02, box 19, folder 4.

⁴¹ Naomi Schor to Michael Riffaterre, March 1, 1976, Naomi Schor papers, Brown University Library, Providence, RI, Ms.2006.02, box 19, folder 4.

cifically literary functions of femininity” at work in the psychological novels of Gustave Flaubert and Émile Zola was sure to find abundant stimulus at a school where the psyche’s linguistic structure was axiomatic and a lively interest in rethinking female sexuality and psychopathology prevailed.⁴² In a report on the experience written several years later, Schor added that “first-hand exposure to psychotic patients and their narratives... was a moving reminder of the human misery that grounds Lacan’s most abstract theorizations.” Given the “extreme medicalization” of psychoanalysis in the United States, this sort of clinical experience would have, she claimed, been unavailable to her otherwise.⁴³

Schor’s ACLS Study Fellowship materials hint at a potent controversy at the intersection of feminism, literary studies, and psychoanalysis. “My concern in all the uses I make of French psychoanalysis,” she wrote in a retrospective assessment of her year at the EFP, “is to demonstrate that in the French context psychoanalysis and feminism are not incompatible, rather inextricably bound up with each other.”⁴⁴ In making this judgment, she intervened in two overlapping debates among anglophone feminist scholars. The first, concerning the character and value of “French feminism,” came to a head in the early 1980s as the writings on sexuality and femininity of psychoanalytically informed authors such as Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, and Julia Kristeva became increasingly influential.⁴⁵ The second, nearly as old as the psychoanalytic movement itself, considered whether Freud’s theories of sexual difference offered anything of value to advocates of greater freedom and equality for women. Lacan’s own pronouncements on the subject of feminine sexuality bridged these discussions even as his relationship to feminism remained nearly as equivocal as Freud’s was.

How could women assert their difference from men without acceding to the inferior status patriarchal society prescribed for them? What sort of difference was this: biological, psychic, social, economic, or all of these – in which case, which form of difference took priority? Was Freud a reactionary “phallocrat” because he misrecognized sexual difference as a biological fact linked inextricably to women’s subordination, or were his theories subtly critical of male domi-

42 Application for ACLS Fellowship, November 12, 1975, Naomi Schor papers, Brown University Library, Providence, RI, Ms.2006.02, box 19, folder 4.

43 Report on ACLS Fellowship, Naomi Schor papers, Brown University Library, Providence, RI, Ms.2006.02, box 19, folder 4.

44 Report on ACLS Fellowship, Naomi Schor papers, Brown University Library, Providence, RI, Ms.2006.02, box 19, folder 4.

45 See Hester Eisenstein and Alice Jardine, eds., *The Future of Difference* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1985); Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron, *New French Feminisms: An Anthology* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980).

nance? Did Lacan remedy or merely obfuscate Freud's error when he recast "castration" as a symbolic ordeal instead of an anatomically-based anxiety? These were among the questions that animated feminist discussions of psychoanalysis starting in the 1970s. Although a narrative counterposing French and Anglo-American views on these issues would develop – in Teresa Brennan's skeptical summary, "French feminism is meant to be about the insistence that women are different, and a challenge to phallogocentric thinking and patriarchal structures of language," while its English-speaking "counterpart is characterized by the insistence that women are equal, and its concern with the real world" – this formula fails to withstand close scrutiny.⁴⁶ By embracing the "French" position, Schor was not so much encouraging her colleagues to adopt a foreign creed as signaling her eagerness to broaden the field of debate.

A similar attitude seems evident in the work of the British author Juliet Mitchell, much of whose book *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (1974) was dedicated to showing that American feminist critics of psychoanalysis misunderstood Freud. To portray Freud – as, according to Mitchell, did authors like Kate Millett, Betty Friedan, or Shulamith Firestone – as "one of the greatest misogynists of all time" was, she argued, to take his writings on femininity out of context.⁴⁷ Its emphasis on the historicity of human subjectivity meant, for Mitchell, that psychoanalysis was not properly seen as bolstering patriarchal society so much as laying the groundwork for a critique of patriarchy. Freud's account of psychic and social development via the Oedipus complex meant he understood that "normal" sexual relations – including women's de facto inferiority – were impossible without any number of compromises and contradictions; thus his thought could be an asset to feminists. The American anthropologist Gayle Rubin developed a similar argument in her essay "The Traffic in Women," which considered whether a synthesis of Freud's thought with (another of Mitchell's crucial sources) Lévi-Strauss's could be applied to a critical analysis of what she called the "sex/gender system." Though Rubin averred that both Lacan and Lévi-Strauss stopped short of renouncing the injustices of modern heterosexual marriage, she suggested that they could serve feminists as Adam Smith and David Ricardo had served Marx: "as reminders of the intractability and magnitude of what we fight" and as critical analysts of "the social machinery we must rearrange."⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Teresa Brennan, introduction to *Between Feminism and Psychoanalysis*, ed. Teresa Brennan (London & New York: Routledge, 2002), 7.

⁴⁷ Juliet Mitchell, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974), 297, xiv.

⁴⁸ Gayle Rubin, "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex," in *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, ed. Rayna R. Reiter (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975), 159, 198.

Both Mitchell and Rubin referred glancingly to Lacan – whose “return to Freud” the former approved of in principle and whose reconfiguration of Freudian “penis envy” into a struggle for the symbolic phallus the latter appropriated – without subjecting his own theories of feminine sexuality to extensive analysis. As a collection of his writings on this subject edited by Mitchell and translator Jacqueline Rose reveals, Lacan continued to develop these theories amid ongoing European and American conversations about the status of psychoanalysis in feminism. “God and the *Jouissance* of the Woman,” excerpted from Lacan’s 1972–73 seminar, is a pithy – and typically enigmatic – example of the direction his thinking had taken. Lacan had moved past structuralism (without, however, abandoning his contention that the unconscious was linguistically structured) and was now contemplating sexual difference in terms of mathematical logic. If man was all that fell under a certain “phallic function,” he told his auditors, then woman was this function’s negation: not-all.⁴⁹ And if the phallic signifier defined man, woman was, he claimed, best represented by the definite article “the,” crossed out in order to indicate that “There is no such thing as *The* woman, where the definite article stands for the universal.”⁵⁰ Further, woman’s non-universality entailed a unique – and uniquely unknowable, quasi-mystical – way of experiencing orgasmic pleasure or *jouissance*, which Lacan compared to the ecstasy of Saint Teresa in “Bernini’s statue in Rome.”⁵¹

In a pair of introductory essays elucidating Lacan’s theories and situating them within broader psychoanalytic debates, Mitchell and Rose expressed their appreciation for his ability to capture the ambiguities of sexual difference while noting the precarity of his own position. Mitchell argued that by retaining Freud’s insistence on the decisive role of the castration complex – that is, the subject’s attitude toward the symbolic phallus, a “necessarily missing object of desire” – in the formation of sexual identity, Lacan escaped the biologicistic snare that trapped psychoanalytic critics in the 1920s and ’30s.⁵² The latter included Karl Abraham, Helene Deutsch, and Karen Horney: analysts who sought to endow women with “something of their own” where sexuality and subjectivity were concerned. According to Mitchell, this led them to emphasize biological

49 Jacques Lacan, “God and the *Jouissance* of the Woman. A Love Letter,” in *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the École Freudienne*, ed. Juliet Mitchell, trans. Jacqueline Rose (New York: W.W. Norton, 1982), 143. This did not mean, he hastened to add, that women could not align themselves with the phallus: “Everyone knows that there are phallic women and that the phallic function does not prevent men from being homosexual.”

50 Lacan, “God,” 144.

51 Lacan, “God,” 147.

52 Juliet Mitchell, “Introduction–I,” in Mitchell, *Feminine Sexuality*, 24.

and anatomical factors foreign to Freud's notion of psychosexuality.⁵³ Insofar as "French feminists" and their anglophone admirers reprised this debate, Rose pointed out, they bore an affinity with Lacan, whose definition of femininity as the place where linguistic meaning could falter paralleled the feminist debate's emphasis on "women's relationship to language."⁵⁴

On the other hand, it is understandable that a correspondent to the editor of the *New York Review of Books* would express bafflement at the prospect of an alliance between Lacan and any "individual women or women's groups."⁵⁵ If Lacan's teaching affirmed that sexuality, like so much of psychic life, could be traced to a gap in linguistic structure, his failure to renounce what some continued to see as Freud's sexual essentialism made him an easy target for the sort of textual criticism feminists had begun to embrace. The pioneer of this style of criticism was Jacques Derrida, whose essay on Lacan's "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter'" drew special attention to the easy slippage between the logic of the phallus and anatomical determinism.⁵⁶ In his reading of Poe's story as an allegory of the repetition compulsion, Derrida argued, Lacan articulated "phallogocentrism" – a masculinist strand of the "metaphysics of presence" Derrida sought to expose and undermine – via a tortuous series of paradoxes and reversals. Starting from the already suspicious position that "the phallus is not the organ, penis or clitoris, that it symbolizes, but it mostly and primarily symbolizes the penis," Lacan proceeded, Derrida claimed, to conclude that "there is only *one* libido, and therefore no difference, and even less an opposition within libido between the masculine and the feminine, and moreover it is masculine by nature."⁵⁷ He was thus, in Derrida's view, far from being the opponent of psycho-

53 Mitchell, "Introduction–I," 20.

54 Jacqueline Rose, "Introduction–II," in Mitchell, *Feminine Sexuality*, 53.

55 Stuart Schneiderman, Fritz Fleischmann, and Richard Wollheim, "Lacan: An Exchange," *The New York Review of Books*, April 5, 1979, accessed June 3, 2021, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/1979/04/05/lacan-an-exchange-2/>. The correspondent, Fritz Fleischmann, wrote in response to a combative review by the British philosopher Richard Wollheim of the first book-length translations, both by Alan Sheridan, of Lacan into English: *Écrits: A Selection* (1977) and *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (1978). In his review, Wollheim wrote that Lacanianism found "its recruits among groups that have nothing in common except the sense that they lack a theory worthy of their cause or calling: feminists, cinéastes, professors of literature." Richard Wollheim, "The Cabinet of Dr. Lacan," *The New York Review of Books*, January 25, 1979, accessed June 3, 2021, <http://www.nybooks.com.libproxy.newschool.edu/articles/1979/01/25/the-cabinet-of-dr-lacan/>.

56 On the origins of this text, see Gregory Jones-Katz, *Deconstruction: An American Institution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021), 136.

57 Jacques Derrida, *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 481–482.

analytic orthodoxy he liked to portray himself as. Rather, his faith that Freud's texts never failed to reveal the "truth" of a single, indivisible, implicitly masculine sex drive meant that Lacan was something more like a psychoanalytic chauvinist or zealot.

The American feminist critics who analyzed and appropriated Lacan's texts starting in the late 1970s were drawn to him equally as a source of inspiration and a target for playfully subversive criticism. As a glance at the private correspondence between two of these figures – Schor and her friend and fellow literary critic Jane Gallop – reveals, Lacan's approach to psychic, sexual, and linguistic problems resonated with them both intellectually and personally. His work served as a bridge between specialized academic knowledge and intimate life, realms Gallop, in particular, was keen to merge. Thus, for example, Gallop wrote to Schor that she had "refound my profound love and admiration for Lacan, the prick." In the same letter she speculated that the gastric disturbance from which she had begun to suffer since embarking on her latest writing project was "a somatic comment on my writing style" and announced that "someday I will be analyzed," preferably in France.⁵⁸

Gallop's letters to Schor express excitement and enthusiasm for a promising intellectual and cultural moment but also occasionally exhibit disappointment and frustration, particularly at the prospect of measuring up to more straitlaced, polished, male colleagues. Gallop complained, for example, that a book she was professionally obligated to read – she was evaluating the author's tenure case – was written in a "sclerotic," "repetitive and defended," excessively "academic" style. She had, she confessed, lost patience for "non-feminist literary criticism."⁵⁹ In her writings on Lacan, she similarly emphasized the seductive, rebellious allure of what she saw as his unrepentant stylishness, which led her to characterize him as not phallogocentric but "phallo-eccentric."⁶⁰ If he was a "prick," he was also a "ladies' man" since, whereas "[p]hallogocentrism and the polemic are masculine, upright matters," the "prick, in some crazy way, is feminine." Gallop continued: "The prick does not play by the rules; he (she) is a narcissistic tease who persuades by means of attraction and resistance, not by orderly systematic discourse."⁶¹ Her own attraction and resistance to Lacan's

58 Jane Gallop to Naomi Schor, October 28, 1978, Naomi Schor papers, Brown University Library, Providence, RI, Ms.2006.02, box 6, folder 1.2.

59 Jane Gallop to Naomi Schor, January 28, 1986, Naomi Schor papers, Brown University Library, Providence, RI, Ms.2006.02, box 6, folder 1.7.

60 Jane Gallop, *The Daughter's Seduction: Feminism and Psychoanalysis* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982), 36.

61 Gallop, *The Daughter's Seduction*, 37.

rhetorical tactics – a desire, seemingly, at once to imitate and refute him – expressed themselves latently in Gallop’s distinctive critical style. Yet after the dissolution of the EFP in 1980 and Lacan’s death the following year, his eccentric and paradoxical teachings would coalesce into something like a new orthodoxy in the hands of an international group of exegetes and popularizers, including a modest American contingent.

Entering the “Freudian Field”

If Lacan’s impact on feminism was one index of his growing significance to American (and more broadly, anglophone) intellectual culture, another was the gradual incursion of his ideas into the field to which he had devoted his labors: psychoanalysis. In his prefatory remarks to *Returning to Freud* (1980), a collection of clinical essays by French analysts that he edited and translated, Stuart Schneiderman – an American literary critic who spent several years among the Parisian Lacanians – argued that “any approach to Lacan that does not see his theory in its relationship to analytic practice is doomed to an irreducible obscurity and confusion.”⁶² As Lacan’s son-in-law and literary executor Jacques-Alain Miller stressed in his commentary on the transcript of an interview between Lacan and a psychotic patient that appeared in Schneiderman’s volume, the Lacanian tradition also treated “obscurity and confusion” as indispensable clinical tools. In his case presentation, Miller wrote, Lacan equally eschewed the customary psychiatric attitude of detached objectivity and some analysts’ pretensions to uncomplicated sympathy with their patients. According to Miller, Lacan showed that there was “a madness in understanding, a madness in communication.” Yet this understanding resided in the patient, whose own paranoid delusions described his mental state more cogently than a psychiatrist or analyst possibly could. Lacan’s genius, therefore, lay in his ability to demonstrate that in the clinical setting he himself “understands nothing.”⁶³

In compiling *Returning to Freud*, Schneiderman drew on the firsthand experience he acquired between 1973 and 1977, when he lived in Paris, went into analysis with Lacan, taught at the newly-established psychoanalysis department at the University of Paris VIII-Vincennes, and became a member of the EFP, an ex-

⁶² Stuart Schneiderman, “The Other Lacan,” in *Returning to Freud: Clinical Psychoanalysis in the School of Lacan*, ed. and trans. Stuart Schneiderman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), 9.

⁶³ Jacques-Alain Miller, “Teachings of the Case Presentation,” in Schneiderman, *Returning to Freud*, 45.

perience he recounted in *Jacques Lacan: The Death of an Intellectual Hero* (1983). In this book – an idiosyncratic combination of memoir, obituary, and cultural criticism – Schneiderman delivered a boldly bleak account of the Lacanian worldview. As Janet Malcolm pointed out in her review, the book is preoccupied with “the symbolization of death in psychoanalysis.”⁶⁴ Among other things, Schneiderman stressed the importance of the analyst's capacity, described by Lacan, to elicit the patient's speech by assuming the position of a “dummy” or dead man (*le mort*).⁶⁵ For Schneiderman, this principle was operational in Lacan's most controversial technical innovation, the short session, of which Schneiderman wrote approvingly that it induced “something like the horror of death.”⁶⁶ Although Schneiderman's morbid musings could be chalked up to poetic justice – after all, the book appeared shortly after Lacan's death – he also sent the clear message that psychoanalysis was not medicine that went down easily.

Schneiderman presented a version of Lacanianism whose claim to authenticity lay in its close proximity to the French original and, accordingly, its opposition to mainstream American psychoanalysis. He argued that the alliance, especially strong in America, between psychoanalysis and medicine was misbegotten and should be abandoned. In his view, “the only [question] in which the idea of cure can properly be related to psychoanalysis” was, “Can psychoanalysis be cured of medicine, of the belief that it is part of the healing professions?”⁶⁷ In the course of his speculations about the psychoanalytic profession's potential future, Schneiderman occasionally gestured toward the question of whether something like an American Lacanianism could be possible. He wrote that “at the termination of a psychoanalysis an analysand knows that his desire is elsewhere. For me... that elsewhere was the United States.”⁶⁸ Having completed his apprenticeship, a new desire materialized: propagating the master's teachings in the country that had thus far served as his greatest rivals' base of operations.

The austerity and severity Schneiderman attributed to Lacanianism were also important attributes of the resolutely medical postwar American psycho-

⁶⁴ Janet Malcolm, “Therapeutic Rudeness,” *The New York Times*, April 3, 1983, accessed June 3, 2021, <http://www.nytimes.com/1983/04/03/books/therapeutic-rudeness.html>.

⁶⁵ The metaphor of *le mort* is drawn from the game of bridge, to which Lacan sometimes compared analysis. See, for example, “The Direction of the Treatment and the Principles of its Power,” in Lacan, *Écrits*, 492.

⁶⁶ Stuart Schneiderman, *Jacques Lacan: The Death of an Intellectual Hero* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983).

⁶⁷ Schneiderman, *Jacques Lacan*, 51.

⁶⁸ Schneiderman, *Jacques Lacan*, 86.

analysis that Lacan made his name inveighing against. That tradition's watchword had been maturity,⁶⁹ or the patient's adaptation to reality through a working alliance with the analyst, who nevertheless assiduously avoided gratifying the analysand's emotional demands. Schneiderman's account suggested, in contrast, that psychoanalysis *chez* Lacan dealt with a dimension of human existence that exceeded the bounds of everyday experience and which the analyst could only gesture toward by playing dead. The patient's task was to grapple not with the demands of reality but the grim fact of human finitude; following Martin Heidegger, Lacan suggested that the human subject was a being-towards-death.

Schneiderman's early project of synthesizing and disseminating Lacan's teachings to curious American audiences arguably came to full fruition in the work of another French-trained American Lacanian analyst and author, Bruce Fink.⁷⁰ In his first book Fink described, in lucid, breezy prose, Lacan's theories of language, the unconscious, desire, discourse, epistemology, and above all subjectivity. Unlike the Freudian subject, Fink admitted, the Lacanian one lacked a demonstrable reality. Instead of adjusting to the reality principle, the Lacanian subject's task was to assume responsibility for something that was impossible to observe directly: the unconscious. The "point" of analytic treatment, Fink wrote, was "to bring the patient to symbolize his or her real," which for Lacan was precisely the dimension of human experience that escaped symbolization.⁷¹ If, however, analysis was an essentially paradoxical enterprise, this did not stop Fink from weaving technical principles into his discussion of Lacanian theory – and he went on to write a standalone guide to Lacanian clinical technique.⁷² Though he and Schneiderman were not alone in attempting to forge an American clinical Lacanianism, they were perhaps unique in their simultaneous maintenance of, on one hand, Lacan's denigration of the authentic self *qua* autonomous ego and, on the other, a beleaguered pragmatism in some ways reminis-

⁶⁹ On what Eli Zaretsky calls the "maturity ethic" of midcentury American psychoanalysis, see Eli Zaretsky, *Political Freud: A History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 29–32, 153–160.

⁷⁰ For an account of Fink's intellectual biography, see Loren Dent and Bruce Fink, "Lacan in the United States," *Contemporary Psychoanalysis* 47, no. 4 (2011): 549–557.

⁷¹ Fink, *The Lacanian Subject*, 182n7.

⁷² Bruce Fink, *A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis: Theory and Technique* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997).

cent of the psychoanalytic attitude as it was often understood in the midcentury U.S.⁷³

In the years between the appearance of Schneiderman's and Fink's books, a pair of journals – *Lacan Study Notes*, which Schneiderman co-founded, and the *Newsletter of the Freudian Field* – began to focus exclusively on Lacan's work and to document and promote the goings-on of a nascent international Lacanian movement.⁷⁴ Although this so-called "Freudian field"⁷⁵ ostensibly lacked any central direction, the appearance of Lacan-focused study groups or "cartels" in the United States, South America, Latin Europe, and the former Yugoslavia owed much to the evangelical efforts of Miller, who continued to edit Lacan's texts and set the tone of the discourse that surrounded them.

The transcript of a lecture Miller delivered at a 1986 psychoanalytic workshop in Chicago reveals a number of his typical precepts. It was, Miller claimed, a mistake to associate Lacan with other French (post-)structuralist thinkers⁷⁶; Lacan was an incomparably innovative theorist and clinician⁷⁷; contemporary psychoanalysts who were not Lacanian basically misunderstood Freud; psychoanalysis was un- or anti-American insofar as it entailed a dark vision of the potential for human happiness, in contrast to "satisfaction guaranteed" consumer culture.⁷⁸ Interventions such as this encouraged Miller's American audience to regard Lacan not only as a figure who, like Derrida or Foucault, offered valuable

73 For a contrasting clinical approach to Lacan – exhibiting none of the latter's skepticism toward the potential of psychoanalysis to foster a more authentic subjectivity – see J. E. Gorney, "Resonance and Subjectivity," *Contemporary Psychoanalysis* 14 (1978): 246–272. For a clinically oriented comparison of Lacan to another prominent Freudian revisionist, Heinz Kohut (who stressed precisely this problem of authentic subjectivity or selfhood), see Judith Feher Gurewich, ed., *Lacan and the New Wave in American Psychoanalysis: The Subject and the Self* (New York: Other Press, 1996). Lunbeck's *Americanization of Narcissism* compares Kohut with social critics like Lasch and Philip Rieff but does not mention Lacan.

74 An editorial that appeared in the *Newsletter of the Freudian Field*'s third issue reported that four Lacanian journals, each based in a different country (Spain, Italy, Brazil, and Slovenia), had recently formed: Ellie Ragland-Sullivan, "Editorial," *Newsletter of the Freudian Field* 2, no. 1 (1988): 3–5.

75 This phrase originated as the name of an Éditions du Seuil book series, initially directed by Lacan and ultimately taken over by Miller. See "Editorial," *Newsletter of the Freudian Field* 1, no. 1 (1987): 1–2.

76 Jacques-Alain Miller, "How Psychoanalysis Cures According to Lacan," *Newsletter of the Freudian Field* 1, no. 2 (1987): 6. His talk's title was, Miller claimed, "a tribute to Heinz Kohut's last work, *How Psychoanalysis Cures*" (4).

77 Miller, "How Psychoanalysis Cures," 26.

78 Miller, "How Psychoanalysis Cures," 22.

insights into contemporary culture, but as a unique – and uniquely significant – intellectual voice for which Miller served as a privileged conduit.

In an article that appeared in the final issue of *Lacan Study Notes*, the journal's editor, Helena Schulz-Keil, explored the ambiguities of the Lacanian movement while offering a searing indictment of it. An analysand of Miller's and student of psychoanalysis at Vincennes before coming to New York, Schulz-Keil combined speculations about Lacanianism's potential to gain adherents in the anglophone world with firsthand observations of the faltering progress American Lacanians had made so far. In addition to offering the not-uncommon argument that Lacan's ideas and practice were incompatible with American culture, she accused Miller of mobilizing the pernicious logic of corporate branding in his efforts to expand and publicize the "Freudian field."

Interestingly, the theoretical framework she employed to describe this logic was Lacanian. Like Lacan's "letter," she wrote, a "business label... cannot be split."⁷⁹ Unlike texts, she went on, labels or brands could not be read or deciphered; they summoned and seduced consumers without engendering knowledge or understanding. She invited her readers to imagine a structural similarity and ideological complicity between the international circulation of Lacan's "brand" and that of financial capital. "The capacity of pure writ," she wrote, "for shifting masses of (unreal) capital around the world has supplanted locally practiced modes of exchange based on the reciprocity of offer and demand. A certain interpretation of Lacanian psychoanalysis hails these developments."⁸⁰

Conclusion

Schulz-Keil's claims about Lacan's devolution into a brand – a signifier winding its way through globalized circuits of (cultural) capital – bring to mind the feminist critic Camille Paglia's characterization of "French theory" as "name-brand consumerism."⁸¹ The vehemence of her tone in this piece, ostensibly a review

⁷⁹ Helena Schulz-Keil, "Lacan in the English Language," *Lacan Study Notes*, no. 6–9 (1988): 204. Her reference to a "letter" that "cannot be split" seems derived from Lacan's "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter,'" in Lacan, *Écrits*, 6–48.

⁸⁰ Schulz-Keil, "Lacan in the English Language," 206.

⁸¹ Camille Paglia, "Junk Bonds and Corporate Raiders: Academe in the Hour of the Wolf," in *Sex, Art, and American Culture: Essays* (New York: Vintage, 1992), 220. In a more sober tone, Daniel Rodgers has similarly argued that: "In a university system that was moving toward more entrepreneurial and market forms, where administrators competed more and more heavily to be on the cutting edge of market trends, 'theory' was a powerful commodity for the department and

essay of two books about sexuality in ancient Greece, led the literary critic Jean-Michel Rabaté to claim that “Paglia is quite true to the pattern sketched by Lacan’s theory of the hysteric, especially in connection with scientific discourse.”⁸² Summarizing this theory, Rabaté writes that “hysteria gives birth to a discourse and maintains a quest for truth that always aims at pointing out the inadequacies of official, serious, and ‘masterful’ knowledge.”⁸³ Along these lines, we can perhaps say that for American Marxist or feminist critics or psychoanalysts working between the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1990s, Lacanianism could serve both as “official, serious” knowledge and as a subversive discourse ironically undermining traditional knowledge claims.

Lacanianism’s durability as an approach to cultural, social, or political critique seems closely tied to its capacity to sow disillusionment. This may also be true of other critical theories but is less obviously true of psychoanalysis as such, whose many schisms the analyst Martin Bergmann has characterized as “painful” insofar as they seem to have imperiled the psychoanalytic mission of applying a rational scientific method to irrational emotional or social forces. For Bergmann, psychoanalytic disputes are not like natural-scientific ones, “which further experiments eventually resolve, but more closely resembled religious and philosophical disputes, which cannot be resolved by rational means.”⁸⁴ Lacan’s dissidence⁸⁵ led him away from the official psychoanalytic community and toward, on one hand, enthusiasts of “theory” and, on the other, psychoanalytic sectarianism.

Unlike the deconstruction proffered by Lacan’s sometime rival Jacques Derrida and a number of influential American literary theorists, Lacanianism was not destined to conquer the academy or spread “throughout American life.”⁸⁶ Nor would it achieve the same level of cultural penetration as the orthodox Freudianism Lacan criticized, which was already falling out of favor when Lacan de-

the academic entrepreneurs who could lay claim to it.” Rodgers, *Age of Fracture*, 159. The “department” in question here is the Yale English department, where Paglia earned a PhD in 1974.

⁸² Jean-Michel Rabaté, *The Future of Theory* (Oxford, UK & Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2002), 14.

⁸³ Rabaté, *The Future of Theory*, 9; quoted in Warren Breckman, “Times of Theory: On Writing the History of French Theory,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 71, no. 3 (2010): 356.

⁸⁴ Martin S. Bergmann, “Rethinking Dissidence and Change in the History of Psychoanalysis,” in *Understanding Dissidence and Controversy in the History of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Martin S. Bergmann (New York: Other Press, 2004), 2.

⁸⁵ Bergmann’s essay situates Lacan in the history of psychoanalytic dissidence; see Bergmann, “Rethinking Dissidence,” 49, 63, 73.

⁸⁶ Jones-Katz, *Deconstruction*, 2.

livered his incomprehensible Johns Hopkins lecture.⁸⁷ Yet as I have suggested here, American intellectuals had good reasons to interest themselves in – and critically interrogate – Lacan’s thought. His teachings on subjects like patriarchal authority, feminine sexuality, and the relationship between the individual and society were suggestive, if ambiguous. His intellectual authority, gained in part through attacks on psychoanalytic orthodoxy, led to the consolidation of a new orthodoxy with an increasingly global reach. Their simultaneous attraction to and uneasiness with these features of Lacanianism appears in the writings of Lacan’s American readers as a constitutive ambivalence.

Dillon Savage is a PhD candidate in history at the University of Texas at Austin. He is interested in modern European and transnational intellectual history, with a special focus on France and its empire. His dissertation examines the relationship between decolonization and the philosophy of history in the works of French and North African authors.

⁸⁷ Eli Zaretsky, *Secrets of the Soul: A Social and Cultural History of Psychoanalysis* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004), 312–313. For a journalistic account of the travails of American psychoanalysis in the 1970s, see Janet Malcolm, *Psychoanalysis, the Impossible Profession* (New York: Vintage Books, 1982).